

DECONSTRUCTING AND ANALYSING MYTHS TO UNDERSTAND THE FATES BY JANE YOLEN

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ABSTRACT

Myths are the stories of the distant past and tradition. They are other-worldly and involve both human and non-human characters (Gods and devils.) Defenders of myth argue that myths must be true narrations and by time have degraded into unsure realities or stories and ultimately into myths. The Fates is one such poem on mythology by Jane Yolen. The Fates, excepting the Fate sisters, contains few direct and indirect references to myths. Since every myth has a moral and tells the flaws and glories of legendary characters, it is important to study and analyze each myth to understand the literal and implied meanings of the poem, as the myth might inject a characteristic to the poem. This paper is such an attempt at deconstructing and analyzing the myths for a better understanding of the poem.

KEYWORDS: Myths, Narrations, Non-Human Characters & Deconstructing

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INTRODUCTION

Jane Hyatt Yolen is an American writer, poet, teacher of writing and literature, and a reviewer of children's literature. She has more than 300 works to her credit, of which *Owl Moon*, *The Devil's Arithmetic* and *How do Dinosaurs Kiss Goodnight?* are more famous. She is called the Hans Christian Anderson of America and the Aesop of the twentieth century. She writes on fantasy, science fiction, folklore and children's fiction. She has been awarded six honorary Doctorates in literature and is also the recipient of the Nebula Award for two times and World Fantasy Award for Life Achievement.

The poem *The Fates* was published in the year 1982. At the surface level, the poem is about the three mythological sisters of Fate, who decide the destiny of every life. Yolen has alluded to a few myths to emphasize the sternness of the Fates. However, the analysis of the poem also projects few conflicts which are discussed later.

As the poem is based on mythology, and as every myth has got a character with character flaws and glories, there is a necessity to analyze every myth to understand the poem in its whole sense. Hence, the words that directly or indirectly relate to a myth in the poem are deconstructed and then analyzed in isolation from the poem's context, and finally the analysis is related to the poem's context to understand its plain and implied meanings.

On reading the poem, the following words that are related to myths are deconstructed or taken out: fire, hero, Ithica, Clotho, Morai and girl. To arrive at an understanding of the poem, the myths behind these words must be analyzed.

The title of the poem, "The Fates," is a common motif of the European polytheism and is represented the Moirai or Morai in Greek Mythology. They are the three mythical sisters who were born to Erebus, the God of

Darkness and Nyx, the Goddess of Night. Darkness and night, symbolically represent that the customary activity of the Morai that has got something to do with death. Sometimes, it is quoted that they are born to Zeus and Themis. The sisters, in the order of their birth, are Atropos: the inevitable (death), Lachesis: the allotter (life) and Clotho: the spinner (birth). Though their origin is uncertain, their duties are widely known. These sisters decide the birth, life intermediate, and death of every life, including the Gods. The question of their control over Zeus's life is uncertain and some myths say that Zeus acts as their advisor and shall sometimes fall to their judgment. In Greece, it is believed that on the eighth or ninth day after the child is born, Clotho shall appear at the house and bless the child and simultaneously start spinning the child's thread. The thread is the child's shuttle and his life-time on the Earth. It is said that the women of the ancient days would swear and pray by Clotho. Lachesis, the second sister, is the measurer of each thread (life). It is she who is responsible for whatever happens to an individual in his life: happiness, misery, punishments, success, and everything but death. Her role is similar to the Judges of the present day. Finally, it is Atropos who decides the time and the manner of one's death. She is seen to be stubborn and insensitive to man's life. She cuts the thread of life with "her abhorred shears."

The tools that these sisters use can be related to textiles or to be particular, to weaving. The spindle of Clotho, the scales, rods, pins, and needles of Lachesis and the scissors of Atropos are the tools that are related to manual weaving. Clotho spins the thread which she stores in her spindle, and Lachesis uses the scales, rods, needles, and pins to measure and allow judgment to every individual and finally, Atropos uses her scissors to cut the thread of life at whatever time and manner she wishes.

Fire is a symbol of hell. Atropos, in particular, is the incarnation of death, and so "fire shadows" must be the shadow of her hand. The hero from Ithica is Odysseus who is the King of Ithaca, also known as Ithica. Odysseus is a Greek hero of the Trojan War. He is the central character of Homer's *Odyssey*, which is about Odysseus's journey back to home and the struggles that he faced. Odysseus is known for his wit, bravery, and cunningness. He had to suffer and struggle various problems on his journey back to Ithaca because it was his idea to create the Trojan horse: which doomed Troy. He was away from Ithaca for twenty years altogether: ten years at the battle of Troy and ten years of troublesome journey to Ithaca.

The final myth to which the poet refers is to Frau Holda (the girl), the Goddess of Spinning in Germanic mythology. She is also considered as the source of women's fertility, controller of weather and protector of unborn children and agriculture. It is believed that Holda came upon flax as a young girl and learned the art of spinning yarn out of it. It is also said that she kept it a secret and taught the art to her disciples very carefully.

Upon relating the essence and traits of the analyzed myth to the poem, it is evident that the poet is talking about the sisters of Fate and the incapability to escape fate. The poem opens with the image of a fiery shadow on the wall which must be of the Fates, Atropos in particular, and sets the heat of the poem. They are busy in weaving the life strands of men. They are doing it as default as the heartbeat and they spin separate threads for every person: be it a hero or a fool.

There are two lines that are repeated throughout the poem after every stanza,

"Needle and scissors, scissors and pins,

Where one life ends, another begins"

The needles, scissors, and pins are the tools of the Fates. There is an often quoted statement that "Every end is a new beginning." Similarly, the poet says that when one life ends another life begins. This appears to be the motif of the

poem.

The poem then moves to the hero, Odysseus from Ithaca. Here the poet asserts her faith over the Fates. As Lachesis is the allotter, rewarder and the Punisher, she decides to punish Odysseus for his invention of the Trojan horse. That is believed to be the reason why Odysseus had to wander for ten years even after the battle of Troy was won. Every place he sought refuge was troublesome to him. The extent of the trouble, which devilled up under his bare foot depended on the kind of pattern Lachesis weaved: plain, herring weave or twill. This puts forth the maxim that no man shall be left unrewarded or unpunished for his actions.

The poet says that the life of one flies too soon. It may come to an end as fast as an arrow that is aimed to the heart, or as fast as the poison of the asp works or as fast as the sword strikes the neck, or as fast as life and death itself are. However, all these ways are determined by the Fates.

The poet then assumes that the silkworm should have come first to life before the Morai and it must be through these worms that Clotho should have learned the art of un-spinning the threads. The worms, it must be noted, only spin silk to form the cocoon and they break it to come out of it, they never unspin. But the Morai un-spin the thread that they have spun to end life. The poet wonders wherefore Clotho and the Morai learned the art of spinning. Yolen compares Clotho to Holda of Germanic mythology and supposes that she should have been attracted by human life as Holda was attracted to flax and then must have decided to crush and end one's life to start spinning another one's life, just as Holda crushed and experimented with flax and spun threads out of it.

CONCLUSIONS

The repetition follows after every stanza, but after the last stanza, there is a difference. Here the poet adds three more tools: spindle rods and tablets and says that when Atropos closes her scissors, one's life comes to an end.

The following conclusions may be drawn in general finally. The poet, at the literal level, tells about the Fates and their customary activity. But the poem also gives rise to the following arguments: mixing up of myths of different parentage (Greek-Morai and Odysseus, European- Fates, Germanic- Holda), the authenticity of mythology, man vs. God, choice vs. Fate and karma.

To argue in defense of mixing up various myths, it can be said that this amalgamation of various myths has enriched the poem, its meaning, and its understanding. In the present world, man lacks the immediacy to myth and this has a toll on his belief in the myths. An individual's belief over God or his atheism has an effect upon the choices he makes and vice versa and hence the answer to the question of man vs. God or choices vs. Fate is ambivalent. Save that, what is evident in the poem is Yolen's strong belief in fate, myths or karma.

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